AFRAID OF EASTER?

April 3, 1988, Easter

9:00 and 11:00 a.m. Worship Services

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Fourth Presbyterian Church, Chicago

Scripture
Isaiah 25:6-9
Mark 16:1-8

"And they went out and fled from the tomb; for trembling and astonishment had come upon them; and they said nothing to any one, for they were afraid." -Mark 16:8 (RSV)

I can't tell you how pleased I was to discover the following information.

"In the early Greek Orthodox tradition, an unusual custom developed... On the day after Easter, clergy and laity would gather in the sanctuary to tell stories, jokes and humorous anecdotes." The reason was that this was the most fitting way to celebrate the resurrection. [Conrad Hyers, And God Created Laughter.]

I was delighted to discover that information because I very much wanted to share a wonderful anecdote with you and for the life of me I couldn't figure out how to work it in to the sermon. I have laughed about it all week. It has provided a lovely grace-note in the somber strains of Holy Week.

Last Sunday morning, the children of our Church School helped us celebrate Palm Sunday by processing into the 11:00 o'clock service waving palm branches. Before they did that, however, they had their own Palm Sunday parade. They paraded around the neighborhood, through the park beside Water Tower Place, waving palm branches. And as they were instructed, singing "Hosanna" - greeting surprised joggers, walkers, people asleep on the benches, with that traditional Palm Sunday salutation: "Hosanna." My guess is that some of them weren't listening very carefully when the teacher explained what Hosanna meant. In any event, one of them devised a very creative way to express the greeting. He was overheard singing to the parade watchers -

"O Hosanna -
Don't you cry for me..."

Not a bad tradition, that Easter joke. Actually not a bad way to observe a most disturbing proposition, namely the assertion that Jesus of Nazareth didn't stay dead. Perhaps telling amusing anecdotes is the only sensible way of dealing with it.

It did not occur to the three women, apparently, that he might not be there; that the tomb might be open and the body gone. They had roused themselves from sleep before dawn in order to complete some unfinished business. Jesus of Nazareth had been taken down from the cross hurriedly. As that Friday wore on, the Sabbath approached and the Romans knew that Jewish sensitivities would be offended by a public execution which extended into that sacred time. So the guards finished the job, removed the body from the cross, turned it over to one of his friends, and stationed a few men at the tomb.

There hadn't been time to prepare the body. There were spices and oils. It was proper and right that his body should receive traditional treatment. So, they were up before dawn in order to do their work as soon as the Sabbath was over.

It had not occurred to them that the tomb might be empty. When it was, when instead of Jesus' dead body they encountered a young man telling them Jesus had risen and was headed for Galilee, they reacted predictably, under the circumstances, normally... They were amazed, astonished; they were terrified and they got out of there as quickly as possible.

It is generally believed that Mark was the first account to be written. And most of the oldest manuscripts end with verse 8...

"...and they said nothing to any one, for they were afraid."

What a peculiar way to conclude, and what a wonderful opportunity for creative writing Mark missed... Can't you see it? "The women, stunned, stood in reverent silence as the rays of the early morning sun played on the angles of rock and the flowers glistened with their mantle of dew. Then they wept, those three, the tears of profound joy and they embraced and danced and ran from the tomb, shouting to startled passersby - 'Our Lord is risen. Hallelujah.'" [Morton Kelsey, Resurrection]

Instead of that, this is how the original reads -

"And they went out and fled from the tomb,
for trembling and astonishment had come upon
them; and they said nothing to any one, for
they were afraid."

The earliest, unadorned account tells it straight. The first witnesses were profoundly disturbed. They didn't say anything to anyone. They were too frightened.

So, on Easter morning we pretty much know what to expect: the same hymns we've sung since childhood; the same story, essentially the same sermon we've heard thirty or forty or fifty times before, adorned with a

new set of timely illustrations and references even as we have adorned ourselves with a new coat and shoes. We come knowing what to expect. Like the women heading for the tomb before dawn, we come because there are some details to be tended to. We have some unfinished business.

We come in astonishing numbers on this day, all over the world, not because it is the socially accepted and expected place to be today. Someone called to inquire what time to go to church in order to see the Easter Parade, and no one in the office knew what she meant. No - this and other churches are full today precisely because this day is about the one, most important item of unfinished business for any of us, namely the matter of life and death. We are here, all of us, with a vague sense that someone has got to deal with this matter.

My suggestion to you is that it is still frightening. And that there are many ways to deal with the matter that are intellectually and spiritually safe.

Maybe it is just a metaphor. Maybe what was resurrected was a set of principles. Maybe what lives on is the memory. What resurrection means is the deathless truth of the Sermon on the Mount. That's quite manageable.

The reality is that his friends became absolutely convinced that he didn't stay dead. No one disputes the fact that he was executed. The unarguable reality is that for nineteen centuries men and women have experienced his love and power in a way that convinced them that he is magnificently present in the world. What really doesn't fit in all of that is the suggestion that resurrection is a metaphor for undying principles. What has never fit, for me at least, is the proposition that his disillusioned and disheartened followers sat around and concocted a story about a resurrection; or that they drank too much wine and began to experience hallucinations; and then went out and died for their new faith.

The customs seem designed to insulate us from it. Eggs and rabbits are venerable old symbols of fertility and re-creation. All things considered, reproduction is quite a good idea, as is the incredible life force within creation - for which there is no more stunning evidence than a single daffodil. But that's not what Easter is about... It always jars me a bit to be reminded that within a decade or so the majority of the world's Christians will be in the Southern Hemisphere and, therefore, that the norm will be Easter in Autumn.

The first witnesses were afraid. I don't have any trouble at all understanding that fear - on two levels, actually.

First, we have always experienced something like fear when we encounter the Holy, the mysterious, the transcendent. When God acts in the Bible, people always respond in fear. At the birth in Bethlehem the angel comes to the shepherds and says, "Fear not." There is an elemental fear that happens when we encounter anything that happens outside the boundaries of our understanding. That's part of what the women felt... elemental fear in the presence of the Holy.

But there is a second level, an even more human fear in this experience. The women, I believe, understood instantaneously that if he was alive, they were living in a new world. If he is alive, all the old assumptions about what is true and safe and inevitable are wrong. The system is not closed. There are unheard of possibilities. What we thought we knew about life and death is not the final word at all. Now it is frightening to live with new possibilities. It is always more comfortable to live with safety and predictability. In an excellent piece in the Editorial Section of The New York Times this morning, the author notes that a dead Jesus offends no one... But we are profoundly jarred, shaken, afraid - of a Risen Christ.

We come to church on Easter because rumor has it there is a word spoken here about life and death that is not spoken anywhere else: We come wanting to hear that word again, and at the same time afraid, terrified, that the word might be true and we might find ourselves suddenly in a new world, no longer predictable.

Hans Kung, in a brief new book that some of us read together through Lent, confronts it... head-on:

"There is the possibility that we die into nothingness. I would not deny my respect for anyone who adopts this position... Of course, this position cannot be proved or refuted. There has never been anyone who could prove that we die into nothingness, that all our living, laboring, loving and suffering ends in nothingness and was ultimately for nothing. This possibility does not seem reasonable."

The other possibility Professor Kung teaches - cannot be proved or refuted either. It is that we "die into an absolute reality we call God." What seems reasonable is that God is not only God of the beginning, but also God of the end. God is our Finisher - as well as our Creator. God has the last word about us as well as the first word." All uf us, Professor Kung says, must decide about this very basic matter. [Why I Am Still A Christian, p. 54]

In fact, I believe that you and I accommodate ourselves to the reality of death - not resurrection. I believe we become convinced that reasonableness is on the side of agnosticism, if not atheism. I believe there comes a time when we begin to take comfort in the dry cynicism of secularity - and strike a kind of bargain with death. I believe we get to a point where we make peace with the power of death in the world, give up the fight and begin to smile benignly at the naive optimism of those who continue to struggle for life and love and justice and peace. And I believe at the heart of that, somehow, is a very personal accommodation with death.

I believe that somewhere along the line you and I come to an accommodation with what happened on Good Friday. More than Jesus of Nazareth was crucified, by the way. What also died that day, shown to be powerless and ineffectual, were his ideas, his vision, his hope. So much for loving your enemies, so much for the blessedness of the meek and the peacemakers. So much for finding your life by losing it. Reality is the cross. Reality is life crucifying its best people and its

best ideas. Better to come to terms with that than to go through life harboring naive illusions.

Much of life looks like Good Friday. What was and is so devastating about the crucifixion is that something so evil could happen to such a good man. Where is the justice in that? Where, in fact, is the justice when hard work and noble dreams are crushed cynically and you find yourself unemployed at mid-life? Where is the justice when the first physical after retirement reveals an inoperable malignancy? Where is the justice when children die and planes crash and a good life unravels?

Reality is Good Friday. Reality is a starving child. Reality is illiteracy and hopelessness a few blocks from here. Reality is a widow, a devastated business executive, a failed marriage. And it makes good common sense to accommodate to that and not expect anything different.

When the women arrived the tomb was open and Jesus was not there. Their assumptions about life and death were shattered and they were afraid. Afraid that it was true; afraid that an unspeakably good event had happened; afraid that the harsh, brutal reality of Good Friday is not the final reality. I think they, and we, are afraid that he is actually going to summon us to live in a different world - on the basis of the resurrection.

"He's going ahead of you," they were told. You'll see him out in front. Your job is not to sit around tending to a dead body but to follow a living Christ into the future. Your job, you disciples, is to take up the fight; to live and laugh and love and serve and die for his Kingdom, which does live within the realities of this world - where justice and love and peace and wholeness and acceptance - are the truths by which people actually live.

At the heart of it all it is a very personal matter...

It was three centuries before Christ.

"Thou hast turned for me my mourning
into dancing," the Psalmist wrote.

And what I read in that is hope and almost a plea - "Somehow, please turn my mourning into dancing."

The great prophet, with his magnificent vision of the mountain, talks about a day when God will swallow up death forever and wipe the tears from every eye.

Contemporary literature echoes. Annie Dillard, in <u>An American Childhood</u>, has a particularly good paragraph on what it means to be alive - listen to it...

"Knowing you are alive is feeling the planet buck under you, rear, kick and try to throw you: It is riding the planet like a log downstream, whooping. Or conversely, you step aside from the dreaming - fast loud

routine and feel time as a stillness about you, and hear the silent air asking in so thin a voice, 'Have you noticed yet that you will die?'"

To be alive is to know about death. To love is to be sharply and painfully aware of mortality.

When his mother died, Dutch theologian, Henri Nouwen, wrote a long letter to his father which was later published as a book. In it he asks why suffering is so heavy when someone close to us dies and puts into words what each of us knows, namely because of love. "Death is deadly," he wrote his father, "because you loved her so much."

"...because you love life, you love your children, you love your grandchildren, you love nature, you love art and music, you love horses, and you love all that is alive and beautiful. Death is absurd for someone who loves so much."

And then comes Easter and the awareness that "love is more powerful than death."

"The love that causes us so much grief and makes us feel so strongly the absurdity of death is stronger than death itself." [A Letter of Consolation, Henri Nouwen, p. 92]

"And they went and fled from the tomb... and they said nothing to any one, for they were afraid."

Maybe they said nothing because the words bend and threaten to break under the load. **Jesus Christ is risen.** Love is stronger than death. The one who is our Creator is our Finisher.

So, may it be affirmed, this magnificent reality, in personal and modest gestures of celebration. If words will not bear the weight of it, may it be known and celebrated in a squeeze of the hand, an embrace, a silent acknowledgement that on this day we deal with a reality larger than our comprehension. May the resurrection be celebrated in the same heroic hymns, the same old sermon, even the eggs and bunnies, and in the reverent silence of those who know they have seen something of the holiness of God... May it be celebrated in the laughter of those who have looked at death and know there is nothing to fear... and in the joyful dancing of those whose weeping is over, whose tears are dried... And, may it be celebrated in the songs of victory.

Songs of the Kingdom of this world becoming the Kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ...

Songs of the one who shall reign forever...

Lord of Lords

King of Kings

Do not be afraid. You seek Jesus of Nazareth who was crucified. He is not here. **He has risen.**

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Glory be to you, O Christ, for your victory.

Glory to you, God, for wiping the tears
from all faces.

Glory to you, Lord God, for turning our
mourning into dancing.

Glory to you for showing us there is
nothing to fear - ever. Amen.